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Adult Attachment, Stress, and Romantic Relationships

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Abstract

In this article, we discuss theory and research on how individuals who have insecure adult romantic attachment orientations typically think, feel, and behave when they or their romantic partners encounter certain types of chronic or acute stress. We first review basic principles of attachment theory and then discuss how two forms of attachment insecurity—*anxiety* and *avoidance*—are associated with unique patterns of emotion regulation in response to certain types of threatening/distressing situations. We then discuss a diathesis-stress process model that has guided our research, highlighting studies that provide support for certain pathways of the model.

Keywords

Attachment; attachment orientations; stress; working models; emotion regulation

Adult Attachment, Stress, and Romantic Relationships

During evolutionary history, protection from danger by a stronger/wiser figure was essential for the survival of infants and young children. To ensure sufficient care/protection, selection pressures produced an innate system—the attachment system—that motivates vulnerable individuals to seek close physical and emotional proximity to their primary caregivers, especially when they are distressed [1,2,3]. These behavioral tendencies increased the chances of surviving to reproductive age, which permitted the genes that coded for the attachment system to be passed on to offspring [4]. This principle is one of the fundamental tenets of attachment theory.

For several years, we and others have investigated how individuals who have different adult romantic attachment orientations think, feel, and behave in different types of stressful situations. Although the attachment system operates more visibly in infants and young children, Bowlby [1,2] maintained that attachment motives affect how people think, feel, and

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behave in close relationships “from the cradle to the grave” [5 p. 129]. Following these footsteps, we have conceptualized attachment insecurity as a diathesis that can generate maladaptive interpersonal responses to certain stressful or threatening events [6].

Principles of Attachment Theory

The primary purpose of the attachment behavioral system is to increase the likelihood that vulnerable individuals survive the perils of childhood [1]. The attachment system was crafted by natural selection to activate (turn on) when an individual experiences fear, anxiety, or related forms of distress. From an evolutionary standpoint, the system is designed to promote survival by maintaining proximity between parents (or other caregiving figures) and vulnerable infants, children, or adults. From a psychological standpoint, proximity reduces fear, anxiety, and related forms of distress, allowing individuals to engage in other life tasks. The attachment system is terminated (turned off) when individuals experience a sufficient reduction in fear, anxiety, or distress. When sufficient security is not achieved, however, the system remains partially or fully activated.

As individuals develop, they amass a mental record of their success at obtaining sufficient proximity/comfort from their attachment figures, beginning with their parents and continuing with close friends and romantic partners. These mental representations, termed *working models* [1,2], have two components: (1) a model of significant others (e.g., parents, close friends, romantic partners), which includes their responsiveness to one’s bids for proximity/comfortable in prior interactions, and (2) a model of the self, which includes information about the self’s ability to get sufficient proximity/comfort and one’s worth as a relationship partner.

Bowlby [1,2,3] believed that how individuals are treated by significant others across the lifespan—especially during times of stress—shapes the expectations, attitudes, and beliefs they have about future partners and relationships. These expectancies, attitudes, and beliefs operate as “if/then” propositions that guide how people think, feel, and behave, especially when they are upset (e.g., “If I am upset, then I can count on my partner to support me”; [7]). Once developed, working models guide how individuals relate to their close partners and the interpersonal world around them, especially in stressful/threatening situations. Working models can, however, change over time in response to new experiences or events that strongly contradict them [2].

Adult Attachment Orientations

Two broad dimensions underlie adult romantic attachment orientations [8,9,10]. The first, *avoidance*, reflects the degree to which individuals are comfortable with closeness and emotional intimacy in relationships. Highly avoidant people have negative views of romantic partners and usually positive, but sometimes brittle, self-views [11]. Avoidant people strive to create and maintain independence, control, and autonomy in their relationships [12] because they believe that seeking psychological/emotional proximity to romantic partners is either not possible or undesirable. These beliefs motivate avoidant people to employ distancing/deactivating coping strategies [6] in which they defensively suppress negative thoughts and emotions to promote independence/autonomy. Persons who score low on

avoidance (those who are more securely attached) are comfortable with intimacy and are willing to both depend on others and have others depend on them.

The second dimension, *anxiety*, assesses the degree to which individuals worry about being underappreciated or abandoned by their romantic partners. Highly anxious individuals are heavily invested in their relationships, and they yearn to get closer to their partners emotionally to feel more secure. Anxious individuals harbor negative self-views and guarded but hopeful views of their romantic partners [13,14]. These conflicted perceptions lead anxious individuals to question their worth, worry about losing their partners, and remain vigilant to signs their partners might be pulling away from them [15]. Thus, they are motivated to increase their deficient sense of felt security [12], which leads them to act in ways that sometimes smother or drive their partners away [16]. Because anxious persons do not know whether they can count on their partners, their working models amplify distress, making them feel even less secure. Accordingly, anxious people tend to use emotion-focused/hyperactivating coping strategies when distressed [6], which sustain or escalate their concerns/worries and often keeps their attachment systems chronically activated [17]. This partially explains why anxious individuals typically have less satisfying, more poorly adjusted relationships [18]. Persons who score low on anxiety (who are more securely attached) do not have these chronic worries and concerns. Although women score slightly higher on anxiety and men score slightly higher on avoidance in some samples, these gender differences are small, and gender rarely interacts with either attachment anxiety or avoidance in predicting relationship outcomes [18].

The Attachment Diathesis-Stress Process Model and Supporting Research

Our research has been structured around the Attachment Diathesis-Stress Process Model [19], shown and described in Figure 1. According to the model, attachment insecurity is a diathesis capable of generating maladaptive responses to certain stressful/threatening events, depending on a person's attachment orientation. We have examined three general categories of stress: external, internal, and chronic. We now discuss some of the studies that have provided support for certain pathways of the model.

External Stress—One line of research testing our diathesis-stress model has investigated how external stress affects individuals with different attachment orientations in relationship contexts. When fear/anxiety is experimentally induced, for example, highly avoidant individuals who are more distressed seek *less* comfort/support from their romantic partners, and their highly avoidant partners (who are engaged in a different, non-stressful task) offer *less* comfort/support if their romantic partners appear more upset [20,21]. Less avoidant people (who tend to be more secure) display the opposite patterns. Another study has shown that, when separating at airports, highly avoidant individuals seek less physical contact with their romantic partners and display more distancing/distraction behaviors than less avoidant people [22]. Laboratory experiments have also shown that just thinking about the ultimate separation—death—is less likely to promote proximity-seeking in insecurely compared to securely attached people [23,24].

Further studies have investigated other types of relationship-relevant threats. For example, when romantic partners view and rate highly attractive people as potential romantic partners with each other (together), highly anxious individuals “get into the heads” of their partners and more accurately infer the relationship-threatening thoughts and feelings that their partners are actually having, which makes them feel less close to their partners. Less anxious individuals (who tend to be more secure) show opposite patterns [25]. When asked to imagine being permanently separated from their partners, highly anxious individuals have particularly strong negative emotional reactions, whereas highly avoidant individuals do not [26,27]. And highly avoidant men report less emotional distress following romantic break-ups [28], perhaps because they can better suppress negative thoughts and feelings about separations/break-ups [29,30].

Internal Stress—A second line of research testing our diathesis-stress model has examined internal stress, given that anxious working models may generate perceptions of heightened stress [19,31]. When highly anxious individuals discuss major (but not minor) conflict topics that could destabilize their relationship, they report more distress, display more dysfunctional behaviors, and view their partners and relationships more negatively. Less anxious people show the reverse patterns [32,33]. Importantly, however, these effects are substantially diminished when the partners of highly anxious people report being more committed to the relationship [34].

When discussing major versus minor jealousy or intimacy issues, highly avoidant individuals are less empathically accurate (i.e., they do not accurately infer what their partners are thinking or feeling during these discussions), whereas highly anxious individuals have significantly higher empathic accuracy (i.e., really wanting to know what their partners are thinking/feeling), but only when they are distressed and are discussing a major threat/problem [35]. And at time-points when they are *most* distressed during difficult conversations, less anxious (more secure) individuals are more calmed when their partners give them emotional support, whereas highly avoidant individuals are more calmed by instrumental support [36,37]. Avoidant people, therefore, benefit from support that does not impinge on their independence and autonomy.

In sum, when highly anxious people encounter internal stressors, they perceive their partners and relationships more negatively and behave in more dysfunctional, relationship-damaging ways. Highly avoidant individuals, in contrast, disengage behaviorally, emotionally, and/or cognitively when exposed to internal stressors. Higher partner commitment, however, appears to buffer highly anxious and highly avoidant people from acting on their negative working models. More secure individuals, by comparison, think, feel, and behave in more constructive ways, especially when acute, relationship-based stress is high [19,38]. These tendencies may allow secure people maintain higher levels of personal and relational well-being [18].

Chronic Life Stress—Additional studies have investigated chronic stress—especially the transition to parenthood [39]. Having a baby is a joyful but chronically stressful experience, making it ideal to test stress-diathesis processes, particularly if attachment insecurity makes individuals more vulnerable to personal and interpersonal problems [40]. Indeed, highly

anxious women enter the transition to parenthood perceiving lower levels of spousal support, which predicts sharper declines in marital satisfaction [41,42] and increases in depressive symptoms [43,44] across the transition. Their husbands show parallel effects, including declines in both marital satisfaction and support-provision over time. Highly avoidant individuals—especially men—who believe their newborn is interfering with their personal or work lives [41] or who perceive they are doing too much childcare [45] also report steep declines in marital satisfaction. Less avoidant individuals (who tend to be more secure) report much smaller postnatal changes in satisfaction and depressive symptoms.

In sum, specific situations/events during the transition to parenthood tend to activate or exacerbate the cardinal concerns of highly anxious and highly avoidant people—abandonment/loss for anxious persons, and lack of autonomy/independence for avoidant persons—which in turn have negative effects on their marital satisfaction and depressive symptoms over time.

Conclusions

The reviewed research provides support for several of the pathways in the Attachment Diathesis-Stress Process Model. It does so by confirming that the vulnerabilities of highly avoidant and highly anxious individuals emerge primarily when they encounter specific types of stressful circumstances/events that activate their working models. Highly avoidant people are not always unsupportive, withdrawn, or uncooperative in their romantic relationships; instead, the defining attributes of avoidance are elicited by certain types of stressful situations, such as feeling pressure to give or receive support, to become more emotionally intimate, and/or to share deep personal emotions. Likewise, highly anxious people are not always clingy, demanding, or prone to engaging in dysfunctional conflict resolution tactics; rather, the prototypic features of anxiety are evoked by certain types of stressful situations, especially those that threaten the stability or quality of their current relationships.

Highly avoidant and highly anxious individuals, however, are less inclined to think, feel, and behave in line with their insecure working models when they are more dependent on their partners/relationships [46] or are involved with more committed partners [34]. Moreover, when they have stressful interactions with their partners, these individuals are less likely to react in “insecure” ways when their romantic partners buffer (emotionally and behaviorally regulate) their attachment-related concerns, which helps insecure partners experience less negative affect and behave more constructively [47,48]. To be successfully, however, these partner buffering attempts must be carefully tailored to meet the specific attachment-relevant needs, concerns, and worries of highly avoidant and highly anxious partners. Future research should explore the potential therapeutic implications of different forms of partner buffering in established relationships.

From a *normative perspective*, three types of negative events can activate the attachment system: (1) negative external events (e.g., dangerous or threatening situations), (2) negative relational events (e.g., relationship conflict, separation, abandonment), and (3) cognitive/emotional stressors (e.g., ruminating about negative events). These events elicit distress in virtually all people. Once aroused, distress triggers species-typical attachment motivations to

seek proximity/support/reassurance from attachment figures (e.g., parents, close friends, romantic partners) in most people, even if they do not consciously feel or act on these motivations. These attachment motivations, in turn, instigate attachment behaviors that mitigate and regulate distress and perceptions of the partner and current situation. Perceptions of the partner/situation are also affected by how the partner behaves in the situation. However, the specific attachment behaviors that individuals display and the partner/relationship perceptions they have depend on their working models (see below). These enacted behaviors and perceptions then affect the personal and relational well-being that individuals feel, report, or display in the stressful situation. Attachment working models can impact all stages of the model, as depicted by the lines from attachment working models leading into each model stage. For example, working models can influence how distressed individuals feel (or acknowledge feeling) in response to certain types of negative/stressful events, and they govern the specific types of attachment motivations that are evoked when distress is experienced. Working models can also affect the types of attachment behaviors that individuals display once attachment motivations are triggered, how they perceive their partners in the situation, and how their partners behave. Each of these pathways can impact the quality of personal and relational well-being during or following the stressful event (e.g., relationship satisfaction, depression, relationship quality).

From an *individual difference perspective*, the Attachment Diathesis-Stress Process Model suggests that individuals with different attachment orientations should respond very differently when they encounter certain types of distressing situations. When highly anxious individuals face stressful events, they should be keenly aware they are upset and should want immediate assistance from their partners. Given their conflicted working models, however, anxious individuals should be motivated to reduce distress by doing whatever it takes to increase proximity with their partners. This process should be exacerbated by their tendency to use emotion-focused/hyperactivating coping strategies [6,19], which direct their attention to the source of distress, lead them to ruminate over “worse-case” outcomes, and divert their attention away from how to resolve the stressor, which is keeping their attachment systems activated. The attachment behaviors that highly anxious individuals exhibit, therefore, should involve intense and obsessive proximity/support/reassurance-seeking from their partners, which often may fail to reduce their distress. Because of their working models and use of emotion-focused coping styles, the partners of anxious individuals should tire of having to continually provide reassurance/support, which anxious individuals may perceive as rejection. They should also perceive their partner’s intentions, motives, and actions in less benevolent terms during the stressful situation, underestimating the care/support that their partners have provided or are willing to provide. These negative perceptions, in turn, should generate less personal and relational well-being following stressful events.

When dealing with stressful events, highly avoidant individuals may not be fully aware they are upset, and they should neither want nor seek help from their partners. In light of their negative, cynical working models, avoidant individuals should be motivated to reduce or contain any distress they feel by being self-reliant, which allows them to reestablish independence, autonomy, and personal control. This process should be facilitated by their use of avoidant/deactivating coping strategies [6,19], which defensively suppress conscious awareness of their distress and attachment needs and behaviors, at least in the short-run.

Consequently, avoidant individuals should display attachment behaviors that permit some contact with their partners, but at a safe, emotionally comfortable distance and on terms dictated by them. Given both their negative working models and avoidant/deactivating coping tactics, the partners of avoidant individuals should offer them less reassurance/support, which avoidant individuals should prefer but still may interpret as rejection. Avoidant individuals should also perceive their partner's intentions, motives, and behaviors in the stressful situation in less benevolent ways, leading them to underestimate the care/support their partners have already given them or are willing to provide. These negative perceptions should, in turn, result in less personal and relational well-being following stressful events.

Though not the focus of this article, when highly secure individuals (i.e., those who score lower on anxiety and/or avoidance) experience distressing situations/events, they should recognize they are upset and may need assistance from their attachment figures (partners), depending on the stressor and the skills they have to deal with it. Given their positive working models, secure individuals should be motivated to manage distress by drawing closer to their partners physically and emotionally to increase closeness and intimacy with them. This tendency should be facilitated by their use of problem-focused coping strategies [6,19], which allow them to resolve most problems constructively and well with appropriate assistance from their partners. The attachment behaviors that highly secure individuals should enact involve requesting or seeking proximity/comfort/support from their partners, which should help them dissipate distress so they can pursue other life tasks. Because of their positive working models and constructive, relationship-centered coping strategies, the partners of highly secure individuals should respond in more positive and constructive ways when highly secure individuals request comfort/care/support from them (unless their partners are insecure). Highly secure individuals should also perceive their partner's intentions, motives, and actions in the situation as being more benevolent. These positive perceptions should lead to better personal and relational well-being following stressful events.

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Highlights

Describes how anxiously and avoidantly attached people think, feel, and behave when distressed

Reviews key principles of attachment theory

Indicates how attachment anxiety and avoidance are associated with different patterns of emotion regulation

Presents a diathesis-stress model that describes these processes in anxiously and avoidantly attached people

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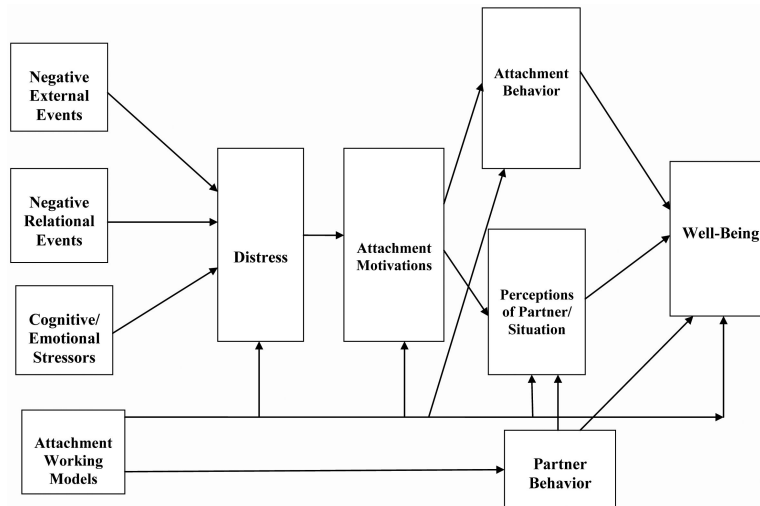


Figure 1. The Attachment Diathesis-Stress Process Model [19] can be understood from a normative (species-typical) and an individual difference perspective.